

SKETCHES FROM EASTERN HISTORY

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VII.

SOME SYRIAN SAINTS.

IN the first centuries of our era there was, in the eastern portions of the Roman empire, a growing tendency to renounce even lawful worldly pleasures for the sake of religion.¹ But the inclination to asceticism acquired peculiar strength after the victory of Christianity, particularly in Egypt and Syria. Was it not the duty of Christians (Gal. v. 24) "to crucify the flesh, with its affections and lusts"? The men of the cloister retained at least a social life; but many ascetics withdrew into entire solitude to serve God, remote from the world and its pleasures. They could not be always fasting; but they contented themselves with the simplest food, which they either gathered for themselves or received in gifts from their admirers. Many exposed themselves, without any protection, to all vicissitudes of weather. Some paid so little attention to the care of their persons as to give up the practice of washing altogether; the legends often speak with reverential wonder of the filth and vermin of these disgusting saints.² Among the number of these Christian hermits there doubtless were some elevated, if mistaken, spirits, of whom, however, only a few can actually have found peace and satisfaction in such a manner of life. But the majority certainly consisted of

¹ For the pagan world compare Jacob Burckhardt, *Constantin* (2nd ed.), p. 218.

² I am told by one who knows, that most Indian ascetics, who in self-mortification in other respects, as a rule, go far beyond the Christian, pay strict attention to cleanliness. There are, however (or have been), ascetics in India, also, who have abjured washing.

petty souls, whom it cost but little to renounce many of those things by which man is really made man. The mendicant who in our day sits silent and solitary in the same spot in all weathers, waiting for the charity of the passers by, might perhaps, in those times and regions, have become a holy anchorite. Many of these last may have suffered in their past lives through fault of their own, or through innocent misfortune; others had, perhaps, crimes on their conscience which they sought to atone for. Fastings and macerations are apt to act on the nervous system and produce visions—now pleasant, now horrible. This must have been very specially the case with persons of the sort we are describing—religiously disposed, and brought up to believe in miracles and manifestations. The saint had at one time to contend with demons in terrible or in alluring shapes, whom, in the last resort, he repelled with blows or volleys of stones; at another time there appeared to him angels and godly men of old, who exhorted and encouraged him, or even revealed to him the future. If the actual events coincided tolerably with what had been previously revealed, the coincidence would gradually come to appear, in the dreamer's mind, greater than it really was. A reputation for prophetic gifts was thus easily acquired. The unfulfilled was forgotten, or the vagueness of the oracles allowed new interpretations. Similarly with miraculous healings. Here, indeed, we must remember that certain nervous diseases can for the moment, or even permanently, be cured by faith in the healing power of another; cures of this sort still occur, and will, perhaps, repeatedly be wrought within the next few months at Treves, in connection with the exhibition of the Holy Coat.¹ Other cures were immediately ascribed to

¹ This was written in August 1891. As it turns out, the crop of miracles at Treves has been very poor. This may be explained partly by the strong light of publicity; partly by the fact that, after all, and even in the lower classes, there has been a considerable weakening of simple faith.

the blessing or intercession of the ascetics; while cases of failure were attributed to sin, or were forgotten. Once an ascetic had come to be reputed a prophet or miracle-worker, his fame rapidly grew, and often stood highest at a distance from the scene of his activity, or after the lapse of some time.

I have already indicated that the hermit seldom or never lived in absolute solitude. Disciples who learned from him and waited upon him, and other admirers, gathered round him. The looks of admiration which others bent upon the man who had given up all earthly things for God were easily understood and well received; these are not the only devout men in whom an overpowering pride has clothed itself in expressions of the deepest humility.

Once men of this kind had attained high consideration they were often applied to for counsel and advice in matters not strictly religious. Governors and princes occasionally paid attention to them, voluntarily, or to some extent under popular compulsion. Still more had the bishops to do so, to whom it can hardly always have been any particular pleasure to share their power (reaching far into secular matters) with a class of men for the most part uneducated and obstinate. The ascetics, it is true, who did not need to consult worldly interests, often espoused the cause of oppressed innocence, and with success; but there was always great risk of their abusing their authority; for the very conditions of his life often made it impossible for the ascetic to judge fairly of the case laid before him. In the deplorable ecclesiastical controversies of the fifth and sixth centuries, the holy hermits and monks often exerted an exciting, seldom a soothing, influence.

Viewing the subject as a whole, we cannot regard this asceticism as other than a morbid phenomenon. It did little good and much evil. The mania for self-mortification

spread among the Syrians like an infection, and, combined with their absorption in hair-splitting dogmatic controversies, had a large influence in giving a false direction to the mind of that people.

In what follows I shall endeavour to exhibit to the reader a few Syrian ascetics. I begin with one of the most famous of them all, and shall afterwards go on to others whose portraits have been drawn for us only by one contemporary, but are characteristic for the whole class.

SIMEON STYLITES.

Simeon was born, towards the end of the fourth century, in Sís, a village near Nicopolis (the modern Isláhiyeh, in Northern Syria).¹ His parents seem to have been fairly substantial people of the lower ranks. He had one surviving brother named Shimshai; the rest of the family died early. While still a child he tended the flocks of his parents, thus becoming accustomed to solitude and privation, and having early opportunity for undisturbed contemplation. He grew up to be a strong and good-looking youth, but of small stature. At this period of his life he repeatedly collected storax, a sweet-smelling resin, and burnt it as an offering without knowing to whom; perhaps in doing so he was unconsciously following some old pagan custom. For, though baptized, he was still at that time without any education, whether religious or secular.

On one occasion, when Simeon accompanied his parents to church in his native village, he was powerfully arrested by the words of the gospel about the blessedness of the poor and the mourner. He had, moreover, according to

¹ Sís itself has not been identified. It is not to be confounded with the Sís in the interior of Cilicia.

a not improbable tradition, visions which pointed him to the path of renunciation; and he gave himself with zeal to asceticism. Even at this early stage the old Syrian biography of Simeon makes him a worker of miracles. The first of these is very peculiar, and deserves to be shortly told as characteristic for its narrators, and also for the readers for whom they wrote. Simeon, after a twenty days' fast, longed for some fish, and went accordingly to the daughter of a fisherman, who had made a large catch in a neighbouring lake, and asked her to sell him five pounds of fish. Untruthfully, but upon oath, she declared that she had none. Just after he had turned and gone a mysterious power suddenly seized upon her and her fish; the latter tumbled out on the road before him and leapt towards him, while the girl rushed after them like one demented. All this occurred in presence of the people, and of the soldiers then in garrison to defend the place against Isaurian pirates. Simeon finally quieted the fish and the girl, delivering to the latter a severe admonition. He then went on his way, but soon saw a large fish right in front of him, which he took, after crossing himself; God so blessed it that he and other shepherds, as well as two soldiers, lived upon it for three whole days.

Simeon was still but young when he entered the monastery of Eusebonas at Tel'edá, in the district of Antioch. To this and other monasteries he handed over his entire fortune, which had been not inconsiderably increased by inheritance from an aunt. At the head of its eighty or one hundred and twenty monks was Heliodorus, who had entered its cloisters whilst still a little child, and never again quitted it; he had never in all his life seen a pig or a cock. Here Simeon remained for nine or ten years, distinguishing himself above his fellows by his severe mortifications.

They fasted only on alternate days, he on every week day; only on Sundays did he eat a few lentils. In order to keep awake in his devotional exercises, he supported himself on a round piece of wood, from which he slipped as soon as he became drowsy; this was a kind of prologue to his subsequent performances. He girt himself round his naked waist with a rough cord of palm bast, which wore into his flesh. After ten days this came to be known, and his brethren, who already had marked with growing disapproval that instead of confining himself to their rules he went far beyond them, succeeded in inducing their superior to expel their eccentric companion. Simeon hid himself in an empty cistern, full of poisonous snakes, scorpions, and other repulsive creatures, as later writers add. Five days afterwards his superior regretted what he had done, and caused Simeon to be sought for and brought back. Soon afterwards, however, he left Tel'edá finally; he was not adapted for any society. He now betook himself to the village of Telnishé (somewhat nearer to Aleppo than to Antioch) to the monastery of Maris, whose sole occupants were an old man and a boy. Here he caused himself to be walled in for the great Lenten fast. Bassus of Edessa, who held the spiritual office of a *periodeutes* or visiter, and who happened to be present, at his urgent request closed up the entrance, after setting down some bread and water for his use. When, at the end of the fast, the door was opened, it was found that both were untouched. This is related by two contemporaries. The belief that during the great fast Simeon never ate anything was certainly general; but whether the thing be perfectly true may be doubted even after the performances of modern fasting men, for, according to the story, we must suppose that the feat was repeated thirty times, year after year. During the fast he, at any rate, ate

less than ever; at the beginning of it he stood, then he sat down as his strength waned, reclining more and more as he sat, until at last he sank half dead upon the ground. On the heights of Telnishé he caused a mandra or "enclosure" to be built for his permanent residence; the ground for it was given him by a priest named Daniel. Here he riveted his right leg to a large stone with an iron chain twenty cubits long. When he at last took off this chain, at the request of the patriarch Meletius of Antioch, there were found in the piece of leather which had protected his skin from the iron more than twenty fat bugs, which he had left quite undisturbed,¹ never stretching out a finger against them,—so Meletius himself informed his biographer Theodoret. The exact zoological designation of the creatures need not be discussed; what is certain is, that for the glory of God the saint allowed himself to swarm with vermin.

In the time during which Simeon sat here in a lonely corner on the ground, he is said to have wrought various miracles, mostly healings, such as befit the regular saint. They were wrought sometimes directly, but sometimes through the agency of objects which he sent,—such as water, or even what was called *hnáná*, or "grace," meaning thereby a mass of dust or filth of the saint kneaded up with oil,—an instrumentality much used in those times in the regions of Syria. Simeon had many visions also, which were guarantees of his high standing. "Out of modesty" he related these only to his most trusted disciples, who were not to speak about them during his lifetime; but, as was to be expected, many of these fine things about him spread far and wide. The consciousness which he enjoyed of his acceptance with God, and the veneration

¹ "Where the skin has little feeling, so also has the mind and the soul" (Hehn, *Culturpflanzen u. Hausthiere*, 3rd ed., p. 472, n. 6).

which men accorded to him, compensated for all the pain which he inflicted on himself.

Simeon's pride finds its most marked expression in the choice of a pillar as his abode. Long before this, at the great sanctuary of the Syrian goddess Attar'athé (or Atargatis), in Hierapolis (Mabbog, Arabic Membij), some ninety English miles distant, there had been a colossal pillar, to the top of which a man twice every year ascended for seven days' converse with the gods;¹ but this practice must have died out long before Simeon's time, and it is highly improbable that such an uninformed person as he should have ever heard anything about it. Moreover, Theodoret, himself a Syrian, and a man of many-sided culture, as well as the other contemporaries of Simeon, all regard this pillar-life as something quite new. We can therefore, at most, attribute both phenomena to similar religious motives; so that Burckhardt—who, so far as I know, has been the first to bring the two facts together—is, to a certain extent, justified in regarding the use of Hierapolis as "the prototype of the later pillar-saints;" but, historically, they are hardly connected.

Simeon began with standing for three months continuously upon the sill of the hole in the wall, through which the sacrament was handed in to him in his enclosure, because during the great fast he had seen, for three whole nights, an angel performing ritual prayer upon this stone, with bowings and prostrations. Next he caused a pillar to be raised for him to stand on; it was only six cubits high, so that he could still, without difficulty, converse with the people below. The top, a cubit or so square, had probably some kind of balustrade for him to lean on, but had no covering; and was completely exposed to the broiling rays

¹ Lucian, *De dea Syria*, c. 28 sq. The scoffer gravely calls the pillar a phallus.

of the Syrian sun, as well as to the rains and snows of the winter, which in Northern Syria, in such an exposed situation, is often bitterly cold. To live upon a pillar was a grave addition to his self-mortification, but at the same time it served to raise him above the world and above men. Many, it is true, even then asked what good purpose was gained, and others openly scoffed at his folly ; all that his defenders could say in reply was, that he had done so because God had commanded him—in other words, as we would translate the expression, because he had taken it into his head to do so. But on the majority the very singularity of his position made a great impression. Had he kept to the level ground he would never have become nearly so famous. With admiring astonishment his biographers go on to relate how, in the course of seven years, Simeon thrice caused pillars to be set up of increasing height, until at last a maximum was reached of thirty-six or forty cubits, at which elevation he remained for fully thirty years. Of this last pillar the following is related :—When he was standing upon his pillar of twenty-two cubits, he at the beginning of the great fast (during which he always withdrew entirely from mankind) gave instructions to prepare, against the end of the forty days, another of thirty cubits, to consist of two parts. The workpeople set themselves to the task, but somehow it always failed ; four weeks had passed, and nothing had been accomplished. His most intimate disciple ventured one night to shout up to the saint tidings of their ill success. Simeon ordered him to come back the following night, when he told him that, by a revelation he had received, the pillar must be forty cubits high and made in three parts, corresponding to the persons in the Trinity. This high pillar was quickly gone on with, so that it was ready by the end of the fast to be brought within the enclosure for the saint to take his stand on it.

On the top of his pillar Simeon prayed continually, with strict regard to external forms. Once an admirer counted that he had prostrated himself one thousand two hundred and forty-four times in succession in prayer; he then stopped counting, but the saint still went on with his devotional exercise. With a very limited intelligence Simeon must have combined an uncommonly healthy and vigorous constitution to be able to carry on such a life for so long. Even the strength of lung which made it possible for him to speak from that height to the people below deserves our respect. He suffered indeed severely in one of his legs from festering sores with maggots; but latterly this malady seems to have abated somewhat,—the pure, dry air doubtless being favourable to a cure. His biographers revel in descriptions of these bodily troubles. In their pages the maggots become at last huge worms, which his favourite disciple must always replace if they slip away. On one occasion, it is related, one of these fell from the top of the pillar to the ground; an Arab chieftain, a believer, took it up, and, full of fervour, laid it to his eyes and to his heart, whereupon it was turned into a precious pearl. During the night and the greater part of the day Simeon occupied himself in prayer and meditation, except, of course, in the hours of sleep; but his afternoons he gave to mankind, and spent in addressing the multitude below,—instructing, consoling, rebuking, admonishing, and settling disputes. We need not doubt that he often espoused the cause of the oppressed with success. In the Roman empire there were then only too many occasions for such intervention. The man who had no one to fear could dare to make his voice heard; and in presence of the great authority which he enjoyed far and wide, many an official must certainly have been compelled to yield, however unwillingly. We still possess the text of a letter in which a priest named

Cosmas, and all the clergy and notables of his village, pledged themselves to a moral and pious life, and, in particular, never to take a higher rate of interest than one-half per cent. per month—that is to say, the half of the then usual interest of twelve per cent. per annum. That he insisted upon this lower rate of interest never being exceeded appears also from other testimony. But in this connection, where the covetousness of the individual is so powerfully supported by the general conditions of trade and commerce, his influence cannot have extended far. On the other side of the account, there was no proper guarantee against abuse of the power which the saint had over the multitude; nor were instances of this wanting. Perhaps the following case comes under the category:—Notoriously one of the worst defects in the constitution of the Roman empire was that the higher municipal officials were weighted with heavy expenses, which often ruined their fortunes; every one therefore, who could, evaded the burden of such charges. It happened on one occasion that the governor of the province wished to bring two young citizens into the Council of the city of Antioch. They betook themselves to Simeon, and represented the conduct of the governor as a piece of vindictiveness. Simeon interfered on their behalf, but without success; the governor immediately afterwards, we are told, was deposed with contumely, summoned to Constantinople, and relegated to exile. This was a divine punishment.

According to the Syriac biography, the powerful minister Asclepiodotus published an ordinance of the emperor Theodosius II., commanding the restoration to the Jews of all the synagogues which had been forcibly taken from them by the Christians. All good Christians were indignant at the idea that buildings where Christian worship had been held should again fall into the hands of “the crucifiers.”

Several bishops, accordingly, turned with this complaint to Simeon, who wrote a blunt letter to the emperor. Theodosius promptly recalled the edict, sent to the saint a humble letter of apology, and deposed Asclepiodotus, the friend of Jews and heathen, the enemy of Christians.—The affair cannot, however, have happened exactly in the manner related. We still possess the text of the imperial mandate to the chancellor (*præfectus prætorio*) Asclepiodotus, in which it is forbidden henceforward to take their synagogues from the Jews, and order is made to pay them reasonable compensation for such as had already been used for Christian worship, and so could not be restored. We can scarcely suppose this order to have cancelled another more favourable to the Jews, and, in any case, Simeon can hardly have had a great share in procuring it, for it was issued as early as 423, when he can have been but little known. The story is nevertheless instructive, as illustrating how unfair men can become through fanaticism; for here a simple claim of justice is represented as a shocking crime. It shows, at the same time, how great was the authority attributed to Simeon.

Once and again, on other occasions, Simeon condescended to hold correspondence with the great ones of the earth. Thus, in the closing period of his life (457–459 A.D.), he gave the emperor Leo a written opinion in favour of the Council of Chalcedon (451), which had defined the dogma of the two natures of Christ. In the same sense he wrote also, about the same time, to the patriarch Basil of Antioch. Whether the saint understood—so far as they are at all intelligible—the dogmatic niceties which were dealt with at Chalcedon, may be left an open question. The Monophysites of Syria, who were opposed to the Council of Chalcedon, and who were a majority in that country, afterwards ignored this action of Simeon and reckoned him among their saints; as

was also occasionally done by the Nestorians, although their doctrine—which refused to call Mary the “mother of God,” and which had been condemned as early as 431 by the Council of Ephesus—was held in detestation by Simeon, and had been expressly repudiated in a letter of his to a former patriarch of Antioch. Simeon, it may be conjectured, dictated his letters to one of his disciples, who stood at the top of the ladder by which his confidants climbed up. Whether he himself could read and write is uncertain.

The actions of this eccentric saint and the anecdotes told about him made, as already hinted, a particular impression on the uneducated. All our informants dwell on the admiration he excited in the wild Arabs. It is credible enough that many Bedouins were induced by him to receive baptism, though hardly in such numbers as is asserted. In doing so they vowed to abstain from the flesh of the wild ass and of the camel. This vow can have been kept only by tribes possessing sheep or goats; with most Arabs camel's flesh is the only available meat, apart from game, which is not plentiful. When Theodoret once, at Simeon's instance, bestowed his blessing on some newly-converted Arabs, these believers so crowded and jostled to touch his limbs and his garments (to secure the blessing properly) that he feared for his life. And once, in true Arab style, the representatives of two different tribes had a free fight at the foot of Simeon's pillar, because each demanded that the saint should send his blessing to its own chief, and not to that of the other. Simeon, with invectives and threats, had the utmost difficulty in separating the combatants. This improvised Christianity did not strike deep root among these Arabs. In some tribes baptism had certainly already disappeared before the rise of Islam, and the Arabs of the then Roman dominion who had continued to profess Christianity, with few exceptions, soon went over

to the new religion. His influence on the inhabitants of Lebanon, who at that time were still mostly pagans, appears to have been more permanent; for it is probable that the Maronites are the descendants of the converts who accepted baptism after Simeon's intercession, as they believed, had freed them from the ravages of wild beasts. These beasts are represented as having been a kind of spectres who appeared in shifting forms; but as it is said that the skins of two of them were hung up beside Simeon's pillar, even the pious editor of the Syriac biography cannot quite free himself of the rationalistic idea that there must have been great exaggeration in this, and that the creatures were actually hyænas.

It is not inconceivable how the fame of the saint, growing ever from mouth to mouth, should have reached Persia also, and even the Persian court: superstition does not always pay heed to differences of religion. Theodoret says only that the king of Persia is reported to have begged consecrated oil of him, but less cautious writers positively assert both this and more.

I spare my readers most of Simeon's miracles, which are mainly of the conventional type. Most of what is related by Theodoret in this connection may be historical; all that is required is to allow for some involuntary corrections of the facts, and to bear in mind the weight of the principle—*post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. Thus, Simeon is said to have predicted on one occasion the coming of a swarm of locusts as a punishment, but that through the divine mercy it would not cause great harm; and this actually came to pass. The story may be essentially true. In these regions locusts are a frequent plague, and so an obvious element in all preaching of sin and its punishment; such preaching must also include some reference to the divine compassion in case of repentance, and thus an announcement of the kind is always justified by

the event, whether that be the punishment of sin or the compassion that follows repentance. Nor have we any reason to doubt that the wife of an Arab prince had a son after Simeon had prayed for her; it is only a somewhat late biography that connects with this fact an incredible miracle of healing. The appearance or disappearance of local calamities was certainly often ascribed to his curse or blessing. His miraculous cures are covered by the general remarks made above (p. 208).

Superstition, however, did not content itself with such miracles as were wrought by every petty saint, but went on to attribute to Simeon magical powers. Thus it is related that creatures so fleet and so shy as the ibex or the stag could be so charmed by means of his name as to become easy captures; this, however, was regarded as a culpable abuse. On the other hand, it was naturally viewed as very praiseworthy when a cleric, by the same means, took away all power of motion from a great snake which was about to devour a child; in this state it continued for three days, when it was released by Simeon with the command to do harm no more. It is even said that a male snake once came to Simeon to beg healing for his female, which was ill; the application was of course successful; the patient attended outside the enclosure, for Simeon (as we know in other connections) strictly prohibited any female to enter that sacred plot of ground.

But the most wonderful miracle of all is as follows. A ship was labouring in the high seas in a heavy storm. At the mast-head there appeared a black man in token that the vessel was doomed. But it so happened that there was on board a man of the region of Amid (Diárbekr, in Mesopotamia), who had with him some of Simeon's holy dust;¹ with this he made a cross upon the mast, scattering the rest over

¹ See above, p. 213 .

the ship, whereupon all with one voice called upon Simeon to procure their deliverance from God. Instantaneously, Simeon himself appeared, vigorously chastising the black man with a scourge, and driving him away. As he fled, the evil one complained of the saint for persecuting him, not by land only, but also by water. The sea forthwith became calm. Let it be observed, that this miracle is effected by Simeon while he is still alive and standing on his pillar. An old popular superstition about the demon of the storm and the heavenly deliverer¹ is here crassly transferred to Simeon, even in his lifetime. According to a shorter version of this story, Simeon once stood long inattentive to the assembled multitude beneath who were imploring his blessing; at last he began to speak, and informed them that in the interval he had in person been saving a ship with 300 souls. That is to say, his spirit had been absent, and unable to pay attention to the people below. He had become a supernatural being, and could be in two places at once.

After fifty-six years of severest asceticism (thirty-seven of them upon his pillars) Simeon died, upwards of seventy years of age, on Wednesday, 2nd September 459. His death was at first kept as secret as possible, that no one might carry off the corpse, so full of blessing. The preparations for his burial were prolonged, and probably the body was embalmed. On 21st September began a funeral procession of unprecedented solemnity, which arrived with the body of the saint at Antioch on the 25th. Bishops and clergy of every grade, officials, and innumerable people accompanied it, as well as the generalissimo of the forces in the eastern provinces, Ardaburius, son of Aspar, with some thousands of Gothic soldiers, who indeed, like their commander, were heretical Arians, but doubtless shared the superstitious veneration of the Syrians. For the first hour the coffin was carried by

¹ Compare Leucothea, the Dioscuri, and the like.

bishops and priests; it was then transferred to a car. The burial took place in the great church of Constantine at Antioch. The emperor Leo wished to transport the body to Constantinople, but abandoned the idea on the earnest entreaty of the Antiochenes. It may be conjectured that the function was the more frequented because men's minds were still agitated on account of the two earthquakes (of September 457 and June 459) which had caused dreadful havoc in Antioch. In the body of the saint the Antiochenes hoped to possess a charm against the recurrence of such manifestations of the "wrath of God"—a hope which proved vain. Evagrius, the Church historian, saw the body of Simeon when the Commander of the Forces in the East, Philippicus, son-in-law of the emperor Maurice, caused it to be exhibited (probably in 588). At that time it was still well preserved, though it had lost some teeth, to which believers had helped themselves as salutary relics. I have not found any later writer who notices, at first hand, the grave and relics of Simeon.

A large building was soon erected on the spot where Simeon had lived. The name of this despiser of all earthly things, whose whole life was a scornful protest against all concern for the beautiful, was commemorated in a masterpiece of architecture, the only fine art which then flourished vigorously, connecting mediæval and modern art with pagan antiquity by great and original works. On the heights of Telnishé arose a splendid church, described by Evagrius, the ruins of which still leave an impression of grandeur on the traveller. The main building forms a cross, the arms of which, at the point of intersection, enclose an open space. In the centre of this still stands the base of Simeon's pillar. In the time of the historian a great shining star was often seen above, in a gallery of the inner space. Evagrius, a native of Syria, regarded this phenomenon, which he himself

had witnessed, as supernatural, just as his pagan countrymen had formerly believed in the divine origin of the light which from time to time was seen above the sacred lake of Aphrodite in Lebanon, or as the Russian pilgrims of the present day still ascribe to a supernatural source the light in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, at which they kindled their Easter tapers.

Simeon has had several successors in Syrian lands. Some at least of these must, however, have greatly modified the penance of standing on the pillar, for several authors are included in their number, and one at least, Joshua Stylites, was a very sober-minded and sensible person.

An enthusiastic deacon named Vulfilaicus, somewhere about the middle of the sixth century, set up for himself in the neighbourhood of Treves a similar pillar. But the bishops ordered him down, as he could not possibly vie with the holy Simeon; and his own bishop, when his back was turned, caused the pillar to be broken to fragments. If not so learned as the Syrians, the Frankish bishops had more common sense. Such ridiculous asceticism did not suit the West, where, on the other hand, the early mediæval Church rose to the task of educating the rude peoples in a way that has no parallel in the East.¹

The famous ecclesiastical writer Theodoret, bishop of Cyrrhus, in Northern Syria, has given us a sketch of Simeon Stylites, with whom he was acquainted, and by whom indeed he was survived. In spite of its somewhat ornate style, this is, on the whole, the most trustworthy biography; the author was a man of education.

Much fuller is the account which was written not long

¹ The horrible rule of the Trappists is of comparatively modern origin.

after Simeon's death by two honest, but rather uneducated Syrians (probably in 472),¹ and which has incorrectly been ascribed by the learned Maronites to the Cosmas mentioned above (p. 217). It gives very useful additions to Theodoret's picture, with a good deal of the legendary exaggeration which already had begun to gather round the figure of the saint. It is, however, highly characteristic for the ideas and manner of expression that prevailed in the circles where it was written. It became very popular, and the MSS. present considerable variations of text, as is usual in such popular books.² Evagrius used it. Quite inferior to both these is the Greek biography which is said to have been written by Antony, a disciple of Simeon. It contains so many extravagances that it can hardly be so old as it professes to be.

Our later authorities about Simeon have no independent value. There are some Syriac letters of Simeon in the British Museum which might be worth publishing, but the editor would have to be on his guard against spurious or interpolated pieces.

John, Monophysite bishop of Asia (the province so called), or Ephesus, a Syrian of Amid (Diárbekr), but who spent great part of his life in Constantinople and elsewhere in the West, composed in his mother-tongue a Church history, of which considerable portions have reached us directly or through other writers, and also a book containing sketches of pious men or saints whom he had met

¹ This is the date of its composition, not of its transcription, as has been supposed.

² This applies even to the Roman and London MSS., which are both very old. Of the latter I was able to use some years ago a transcript kindly lent me by Prof. Kleyn, of Utrecht, but in the preparation of this essay I have had only a few notes from it at my disposal.

in the course of his long life. John was learned, and, as it seems, a man of some activity, but of little enlightenment. Naturally of a mild disposition, he was nevertheless a zealous Monophysite, and hated the Council of Chalcedon with all his heart. All his pious characters accordingly are strict Monophysites. The world brought before us in these sketches is dismal enough, but if we arm ourselves with the needful impartiality, we can learn from them a great deal about the period to which they relate. In presenting a few of these figures to my readers I do not select the most important, but such as exhibit most clearly some of the characteristics of the Syrians of that age.

SIMEON AND SERGIUS.

In the neighbourhood of Amid there were many ascetics about the year 500. One of these, called Simeon (one of the commonest names of the time), lived indeed as a hermit like the others, yet was of a very hospitable spirit. When he was alone he mortified himself with the utmost severity, and ate absolutely nothing for as many as ten days at a stretch; for, since it is written that where two or three are gathered together in Christ's name, there is He in the midst of them (Matt. xviii. 20), it followed that Simeon by himself was not able to secure the presence of Christ, and without this he would not eat. If, however, a strange monk, or monks, arrived, he admitted them over the doorless wall of his enclosure by a kind of ladder, received them cordially, washed their feet, and after further proving his humility by secretly drinking three times of the water with which he had washed them (!), set wine before them, and the produce of his garden. He then ate with them and was happy. To laymen and to women he gave food through a hole in the wall. His garden is said to have

grown enough to feed forty people, although it was only twenty cubits long and ten cubits broad, which may be believed if we consider that the climate was favourable and the guests very abstemious. Aided by one or two disciples who were usually with him, Simeon through the hole in his wall, at different times of the day, taught children of various ages to read the Psalter and other holy books. He was evidently a man of cheerful and amiable character, and worthy of a better vocation.

His most notable disciple was Sergius; he was a zealot *pur sang*. His special annoyance was the toleration given to the Jews in the village. "He burned with love for his Lord, and gnashed his teeth" against "the murderers of God." With a handful of younger people accordingly he one night set fire to their synagogue, and burnt it with its books and trumpets and other sacred objects. As the Jews stood under the protection of the great church in Amid, to which they paid dues, they laid a complaint against Sergius before its authorities. But in the meanwhile he and his people had lost no time in planting, on the site of the synagogue, a chapel, which they dedicated to the Mother of God; so that the soldiers sent to restore the Jews to their rights were helpless, a church once consecrated being inalienable. The Jews now, in revenge, burned down the cells of Simeon and Sergius; but these were at once rebuilt by the latter, who also destroyed by night the new synagogue, now near completion, and carried matters so that the Jews were completely terrorised. When at last Sergius withdrew from his master (with whom he had been for some twenty years), to shut himself up in a low and narrow cell, the Jews took courage to begin building once more; but the holy man caused his disciples to set fire to this also, whereupon they desisted from making any further attempt as long as he lived.

In 520 the emperor, Justin I., took strong measures against the Monophysites, to which sect our two anchorites belonged. The agents of the Government left the aged Simeon unmolested, but tried to induce Sergius to acknowledge the Council of Chalcedon. He, however, received them with curses, and swore that if they drove him out he would anathematise them from the pulpit of the great church in face of the congregation. In spite of the threat, they broke through a wall of his cell and did drive him out. He took refuge with the pillar-saint Maron, also a zealous Monophysite, after staying with whom for a short time he addressed himself to the fulfilment of his oath. Armed with the blessing of Maron, who at first had dissuaded him from the enterprise, he went on Sunday to the church when the whole congregation—including many Monophysites, who joined in the service, though they abstained from communicating with the other party—was assembled; and while the preacher was in the middle of his sermon before the “so-called bishop,” the weird figure of the hermit in ragged sackcloth suddenly made its appearance. Planting the cross, which he had carried upon his back, in front of the pulpit, he sprang up the steps, fell on the preacher with cuffs and abusive language, and flung him from his place. He then solemnly pronounced from the pulpit an anathema upon the Council of Chalcedon and on all who accepted its decrees. A great uproar, of course, ensued. Sergius was arrested and taken into custody, his long hermit’s beard cut off, and he himself sent in chains to a neighbouring monastery in Armenia, the monks of which, three hundred in number, were all zealous partisans of the Council.¹ The Government, we see, was very gentle with this violent opponent; if the Syrian Monophysites

¹ The Armenians for the most part were Monophysites, and still are so except those who are “United” to the Church of Rome.

had gained the upper hand, their treatment of a similar offender would have been very different. Sergius, however, managed to make his escape three days afterwards, and finding his way back to Simeon, began to build a cell beside him. His adversaries, finding themselves unable to scare him away, left him personally unmolested,—no doubt out of consideration for the temper of the populace,—and contented themselves with pulling down what he had built. He now showed the same determination as in his contest with the Jews, swearing “by Him who built up the world, and who was called the carpenter’s son,” that he would never cease to renew his task as often as his work was thrown down; a vow which he kept.

Sergius predeceased Simeon, who, in the closing years of his life had grown very weak and ill, so as to be no longer able (greatly to his regret) personally to serve his guests. He died after forty-seven years of a hermit life. John of Ephesus testifies that God wrought many miracles by him, but does not go into particulars.

MÁRÁ.

Márá, a native of a highland village to the north of Amid, was a huge man of great bodily strength. Although holding some inferior ecclesiastical office he was still a layman, and when about thirty years of age his parents wished him to marry. But after everything had been prepared for the wedding the spirit came upon him, and constrained him to make his escape by night.¹ He went to a wonder-working hermit named Paul, who lived near Hisn Ziyát (Kharput), in a cave which was reputed a haunt of evil spirits. Márá remained five years with Paul as his disciple in prayer,

¹ An incident that more than once occurs in the lives of Syrian saints, both legendary and historical. See below, p. 234.

fasting, and other ascetic exercises, and is alleged to have slept for only one or two hours of the twenty-four. In the severest cold of winter he went with bare and bleeding feet through deep mountain snow for firewood. His master vainly urged him not to overdo his self-mortifications. In order to be thoroughly free of his family and their worldly tendencies, he betook himself to Egypt, the chief school of asceticism, where he visited various penitents, and himself lived as one for fifteen years.

At this period Justinian's Government was making its attempt to force the Egyptians, decided Monophysites, to accept the decrees of Chalcedon. For this end here, as in Mesopotamia, it particularly sought to win over the monks and hermits, the most powerful authorities with the masses, and if they proved obstinate to scatter and drive them away. Thus Márá, as a firm Monophysite, was driven from his cell. But instead of simply withdrawing farther into the desert, he took ship for Constantinople. There, where the majority were thoroughly "Orthodox," the foreign Monophysites were tolerated by Government as harmless, and the Empress Theodora was so much their declared protectress that we must presume her to have acted with her husband's approval. Justinian may have had his own reasons for not pressing this powerful party too hard. Sheltered under Theodora's wing, many of the Monophysites were not slow to flatter that clever lady, whose questionable past was in their eyes fully atoned for by her soundness in the faith. But our hermit was not of that sort. John of Ephesus declines to repeat the terms of reproach hurled in the faces of the imperial pair by Márá when he presented himself before them in his tattered garb; it would not be fitting to do so, he tells us; and, besides, he would not be believed. All this was in execrable taste; yet it is a real pleasure

to see that there still were some people capable of confronting the servile "Byzantinism" of the day in a way that was manly and independent. Neither emperor nor empress was in a condition to meet this holy zeal with violence, if only because they themselves felt a superstitious awe in the presence of such a man. Theodora even sought to keep Márá near herself; perhaps she saw in the rough-tongued saint the confessor her long-borne burden of sin required. She even attempted to win him with a hundred pounds of gold, but he hurled the bag from him with one hand, and said: "To hell with thyself, and with the money wherewith thou wouldst tempt me!" Court and city were astounded at the bodily strength he showed in this, and still more at his contempt for Mammon,—a rare sight in Constantinople.

Márá next retired to the hills immediately to the north of Constantinople, and there lived as a hermit. The empress sent her courtiers to tell him that she would be glad to supply whatever he wished. They had great difficulty in finding him, as he had no fixed dwelling. By way of expressing his thanks, he sent back the message that she need not suppose herself to possess aught that servants of God could use, unless it were the fear of God, if she possessed such a thing as that. With all his rudeness he still maintained relations with the court. He earned his bread by making mats and baskets of palm leaves, but his principal nourishment consisted of wild fruits and herbs. Against winter he erected for himself some kind of a hut in the mountains. Being reputed a saint he had many visitors.

It, of course, came to be well known that Márá was frequently visited by messengers from the empress, and this naturally gave rise to the idea that the hermit's hovel must contain imperial gifts. One night, accordingly,

he received a visit from a robber band. But the saint wrested from one of them the club with which he had attacked him, seized him by the hair, and threw him to the ground; three others he disposed of in the same way, whereupon the six who were left took to flight. Three of these also he succeeded in overtaking, and after binding them all he triumphed over them at his leisure. Next morning the visitors who came saw what had happened; naturally they wished to hand the robbers over to the authorities, but Mára, retaining only their swords and clubs, dismissed them with a vigorous allocution. The affair became known, and a chamberlain carried the weapons to the emperor and empress, thus giving ocular demonstration of what can be done by the power of prayer when conjoined with strength of arm. There may be some exaggeration in this story, but the substance of it as related by John of Ephesus, who was resident in Constantinople at the time, and knew Mára personally, is doubtless correct.

After a sojourn of some years among the mountains, Mára allowed an official of the court to purchase for him a small villa near the city, where he lived for five years, earning what was required for the sustenance of himself and his devout and needy guests by gardening. He often sent salutary exhortations to the emperor and empress. On the outbreak of a great plague in 542, he got workpeople sent from the court to set up a cemetery with vaults and chapel for poor strangers and for himself. Hardly had they completed their task when he died. His funeral was attended by many bishops and inferior clergy, as well as monks, courtiers, and high officers of State.

Of Mára, whose vigorous and somewhat humorous figure presents a welcome variety amid the mass of ordinary ascetics, no miracles are recorded.

THEOPHILUS AND MARY.

About the year 530 there appeared in the streets of Amid a merry-andrew (*mimus*) and his female companion, who seemed to be a prostitute. People of the kind were no rarities even in the pious East, but this couple attracted special attention by their youth and beauty. The public witnessed their performances with pleasure, but treated them, as was also the custom, with brutality; the poor creatures received many little presents, doubtless, but not without kicks and cuffs. With nightfall they regularly disappeared, and no one could find out where they had gone. Some men of influence, whose carnal passions had been inflamed, now procured from the governor an order that the woman should be given over to prostitution; but a God-fearing lady named Cosmo rescued her, took her to be with herself, and exhorted her to a better life. She listened to the advice with penitential mien, but forthwith returned to her companion. Now, however, a pious man named John, an acquaintance of John of Ephesus, began to suspect something extraordinary about the pair. With much trouble he discovered the retreat where their nights were spent, and saw them engaged in long-continued prayer. He now came up to them and asked an explanation. With great reluctance they consented, but only after he had solemnly promised upon oath to tell no one as long as they continued in Amid, and even to treat them with the usual contumely wherever he should see them in public. Their story, which they told the following night, was that their names were Theophilus and Mary, and that each was an only child of noble and prosperous Antiochenes. When Theophilus was fifteen years of age, he went on to say, he one night discovered, in a stall of his father's stables, a poor man, who had hidden himself

there in the litter against the cold; his mouth and hands emitted a halo, which Theophilus alone could see, and which disappeared whenever the servants entered. The holy man, at his urgent entreaty, confessed to him (but only on condition of secrecy) that his name was Procopius, a Roman, who had fled from home to escape his approaching marriage. He predicted to Theophilus the approaching death in that year of his parents, and of those of his affianced bride, and exhorted him on this event to sell all that he had and give it to the poor, and himself to live a consecrated life in disguise; the lady also was to do the same. They actually did as they had been bidden, and lived in virginity together, while in the eyes of the world they appeared to be living in shameful immorality. For a whole year John held regular communication with this saintly pair; at the end of that time they disappeared, and for seven years he sought for them in vain; but John of Ephesus once afterwards met them near Tella (south of Amid, towards Edessa).

The author says that his informant had assured him upon his solemn oath of the truth of this story; and though one might be tempted to suspect that the pious man had simply been the victim of a couple of impostors, I, for my part, believe the narrative to be accurate in its main features. The light that proceeded from the holy beggar, and his prophecy, need not mislead us. The story, which comes to us through two intermediaries, may unintentionally have received various touches of the marvellous, and, above all, some account must be taken of the religiously excited fancy of the young man himself, which perhaps was full of such figures as that of the Roman "man of God"¹ fleeing from his nuptials, whose double the Procopius of our narrative is. It is indeed the very height of

¹ In later forms of the legend his name is St. Alexius.

unnatural self-abnegation when a virtuous maiden of even excessive spirituality ventures to assume the disguise of a common prostitute so as to bear the full shame of sin for the glory of God.

“Opfer fallen hier
Weder Lamm noch Stier
Aber Menschenopfer unerhört.”¹

These Syrians were too apt to hold everything natural for wickedness; and yet unbridled sensuality was by no means unknown in their circle.

¹ “Sacrifices here are neither lamb nor steer,
But human sacrifice unspeakable.”—GOETHE.